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BOOK REVIEW

Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age

Dhiraj Murthy

Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013. 193 pp. \$22.95 pbk.

Reviewed by Sue Burzynski Bullard,

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Twitter has helped to shape social communication in today's world. In his book, Dhiraj Murthy recognizes Twitter's impact as a communication medium and puts it in context. Murthy, a research associate in sociology and anthropology at Bowdoin College, acknowledges that his book does not explore every aspect of Twitter's effect on our lives. As he puts it, "this book has started the conversation rather than concluding it."

Social media, including Twitter, are changing so rapidly that it is virtually impossible to stay current—at least in a book format. Books on social media, including this one, are outdated as soon as they are published.

Yet Murthy does a good job of explaining what Twitter is and connecting it to social theories. In chapter 1, he defines the microblogging site and explains how it differs from Facebook. He concludes correctly that Twitter has changed the culture when it comes to "diary keeping, news consumption, job searching."

In his second and third chapters, Murthy uses the telegraph and its impact on society as a way to put Twitter in historical context. He notes the social media site has broadened today's global village but acknowledges that not everyone has access or chooses to use it. He examines Twitter's niche as a social communication medium despite that digital divide. Murthy notes Twitter's effectiveness in watching events unfold in real time. Following tweets of both journalists and ordinary people during disasters, he said, gives Twitter users a sense of being at the scene.

Chapters 4 through 7 highlight Twitter's role in specific areas, including journalism, disasters, activism, and health care. The book follows a logical progression with each chapter building on information in the one that precedes it. At times, however, it is repetitive, perhaps in the author's attempt to stress key points.

Chapter 4, which explores Twitter's influence on journalism, provides an interesting overview for journalism scholars and students. Twitter's impact on journalism has been transformational—as the agent for increased transparency and in the blurring of lines between news consumers and producers. Murthy also notes the ability of citizens to "break news" on Twitter and the use of crowdsourcing by traditional media outlets. Twitter, he concludes, has contributed to changes in norms and an evolving news environment.

Chapter 5 focuses on Twitter's role in disasters, noting again how the service is used for sending and receiving real-time information. He cites the use of Twitter during the 2011 Japanese earthquake as an example. And although Twitter helps disseminate useful information during a disaster, Murthy recognizes that its weakness is that the most popular items on Twitter are not always based on expertise.

Chapter 6 explores Twitter's use by activists, using Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street as two central examples. Although few people in Egypt had access to Twitter during uprisings there, authorities saw the social network as a threat. And Twitter was used as a way to reach international journalists and as a method of organizing disparate groups during the uprising. Murthy said Twitter does not cause revolutions, as some have suggested, but it does cast a global spotlight on them.

In chapter 7, Murthy tackles Twitter's role in health. It's become an information source, a way to find support networks, and a method of correcting bad information. Its advantages include the fact that it is quick and borderless, making it easy to communicate with great numbers of people from all over. But Murthy points out downsides, including confusion over whether following a Twitter user translates into an endorsement. Some health care professionals worry that following an account may be seen as an endorsement. Another concern for health care workers is the risk of sharing too much personal information.

Twitter, Murthy concludes, has left a significant mark on many parts of social, political, and economic life. It is a legitimate communications medium with its share of pluses and minuses. His book gives readers a glimpse into Twitter's beginnings, but as Murthy himself notes, the book's scope is limited. Still, particularly for those readers unfamiliar with Twitter and its impact on social communication, the book provides a solid introduction.